

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH STEVEN BUCKLER, PRT TEAM LEADER,
SALAHUDDIN PROVINCE VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:31 A.M. EDT DATE:
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.defendamerica.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Here you
are on the call.

MR. BUCKLER: Thank you. My name is Steve Buckler. I'm the Provincial
Reconstruction Team leader in Tikrit, Iraq.

Is Jack Holt there?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, I am.

Mr. Buckler, welcome to the bloggers roundtable this morning. Glad you
could be with us.

MR. BUCKLER: Thank you. MR. HOLT: Do you happen to have an opening
statement for us?

MR. BUCKLER: Yes, I was -- I'll have a couple of minutes here, and if
you want me to stop and start answering questions, I will certainly do so. But
just by intro, I'll -- let me just go over the team profile a little bit, what
we do and how we do it.

As I said, I'm the Provincial Reconstruction Team leader in -- for the
Salahuddin province in north-central Iraq. We're posted on an Army base about a
hundred miles north of Baghdad. It is near Tikrit, Iraq, and it's on COB
Speicher. We're a team of about 50 people, a third of them are our security
personnel who escort us in in the humvees when we go into town; the other two-
thirds, 35 or so, are a mix of civilian and military members. The military arm
was exclusively reservists with civil affairs backgrounds. We're in town five,
six days a week interacting for the most part with provincial government
officials, these are both legislative and executive branch.

We work a lot with the city and provincial engineers on public
services. We extend ourselves a bit out into the provincial cities. We travel
as much as we can, and we're assigning staff members out into the major cities
of Samarra, Balad and Baiji. We're in the process of doing that right now to
extend our influence out there.

Our two main objectives, these are as Baghdad expresses them to us.
We're here to develop political moderates and to build economic capacity. We're

also instructed to figure out how to do it, so they rely a great deal upon our ability to recognize what needs to be done, adapt in order to do it, and just keep tweaking our interactions with the provincial authorities to keep pushing them along in those two directions.

What does that really mean? These are sort of subjective, but a good way to think of it -- I think some of the accomplishments in which we share -- you know, we're not solely responsible for the successes here, but we do contribute to them. The province passed a successful '07 capital budget. That's about a hundred million-dollar budget.

When you consider the history of Iraq, this is probably the first time anything like that has been done. They were elected in January of '06, as I recall, and had to simply develop a legislative process, a budget process and create something from that.

They're in the process now of executing the budget, which of course for a capital budget means advertising, letting contracts, monitoring the construction and making progress payments. They're doing acceptably well on that. And then in September, they will begin the '08 budget process. We're helping with the training and developing processes and relationships within the legislature and then also between them and their city council and mayoral contacts throughout the province, so a lot of our work is contact work as well as helping the developed process.

How are we doing? I was really quite delighted -- two days ago I was sitting next to the head of the provincial council, and by sidebar I would point out that Tikrit is very close to Saddam Hussein's home village, and so Tikrit and Salahuddin province were widely perceived -- and it's real as well -- as having been heavily favored by Saddam Hussein's regime -- but the head of the provincial council announced to a gathering that he has more projects going now than they ever had during the era of Saddam Hussein. So I think when an elected official can stand up and say that, it means there has been real progress. It's just part of their political mathematics that the number of projects are a sign of their success in governance, and I think that is really good. It pleased me to no end.

Some of the political initiatives that we're following here, in addition to working with -- I'm trying to get the public services improved -- we're working with provincial leaders on helping them develop a public message and social programs to combat extremism. It's very similar to what we see in the United States with gang violence. These are essentially, in many cases, cult behavior that takes advantage of kids on the margins of society and pulls them in and, in this case, uses them in the insurgency.

We spend a lot of time, and we're trying to increase, you know, face time with the sheikhs here.

They're a very important political and social institution here.

As you read in the press in the U.S., of course, there's a -- there are movements throughout Iraq in which the sheikhs are undertaking basically neighborhood watch or police activities to push the insurgents out. We have that going here but we also have a very good network and organization of the tribal sheikhs that operates politically. They work very closely with the elected government on many issues that affect the tribal organization.

We're organized to work in three big areas: governance, economic development and then rule of law. Our teams go out and interact a lot on those areas. Maybe I should wrap up my own remarks and I hope I've given enough to at least tease a few questions out.

MR. HOLT: I'm sure you have, sir.

MR. BUCKLER: I'll open the floor.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Dave Dilegge with Small Wars Journal, why don't you get us started this time?

Q Thanks, Jack. Good day, Mr. Buckler.

A quick question: I asked this earlier to -- (name inaudible). I'm a little concerned. I really think you guys are doing some great stuff out there, and a PRT or a PRT-like program is going to be with us for a long time. And we're going to be needing these capabilities down the road, much like the old COORDS program in Vietnam.

MR. BUCKLER: (Laughs.)

Q And there's no formal lessons-learned structure in place, but I'd like to get your thoughts on that, on how we can ensure for later, for organizational purposes, training, education, whatever, that we don't lose a lot of the PTTs and the things that you guys are doing in-country. Thank you.

MR. BUCKLER: Training and continuity on our side or that of the Iraqis?

Q No, this is for on our side, so that if we have to do something like this again, a PRT program or a PRT-like program, that we don't have to completely do it completely ad hoc, say, 5, 10 years from now in another place.

MR. BUCKLER: Yes, now that's a bit of a toughie. What -- I am not quite sure what the military are doing. I know that out at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, of course, they've come out with a new doctrine on counterinsurgency. But I take your point, that you're addressing more the civil affairs, developmental aspect of this job. And I don't believe that we have been quite so methodical on the civilian side of the equation as my Army colleagues have been.

Kind of pointing out the difficulties or challenges is no way to answer your question. But the hump we need to get over is the fact that right now the civilian members of the PRTs are drawn from a whole array of USAID-funded organizations and then such government departments as the State Department, of which I am an employee, Department of Agriculture, direct employees of USAID.

So what really needs to occur is some form of clearinghouse, cache, inventory of civilian-sector experience. The State Department has an office of reconstruction, and CRS, I believe, is the abbreviation for it. And gracious sakes, I think I spent too much time today waiting in the hot sun for helicopter rides, because it does not come to me immediately. But this new office -- it's only about two years old -- I believe, is intended to become the reservoir both

of knowledge and organization to address what you just highlighted is the challenge of the future.

I think, last I looked, they had not been fully funded up to their request to Congress. So I'm not quite sure where, between the administration and Congress, that lies. But I believe that office is intended to at the end of the day be the continuum.

Kind of at the individual level, though -- and I find this far more intriguing as a Foreign Service officer -- I'm running into more and more of my colleagues who are kind of circuit riders on the Kosovo-Afghanistan-Iraq -- the parts of the world that are oftentimes under U.N. Security Council resolution care. And we have our own teams there doing reconstruction and working on governance, doing the same stuff we do here.

So I can see, within the Foreign Service, they're certainly developing, officer by officer by officer, good experience in these kinds of activities.

And I have to put in a little plug for the Foreign Service. People sometimes ask me now what makes me so bold as to think that I have anything to offer here in Iraq. But I've been in the Foreign Service for a few decades. About half of my career has been in the developing world, in Africa, and I'm finding in working with Iraqi officials -- you know, a very sophisticated country, but one that is still trying to recoup from the damages of decades of Saddam Hussein and, you know, the recent and continuing insurgency. A lot of my experience in the developing world has been a real boost here. You run into, you know, great people in the Iraqi government, but the means to develop the systems of government are simply something that they have not had a great deal of -- well, in many cases, almost no experience doing at all.

When I deal with those who are former military officers, as I do here in Salahuddin, they're able to transfer those organizational skills very handily over into the civilian sector, but it's a long, hard process for them.

But we got folks from Foreign Service who have been through this before. And of course the Civil Affairs Teams in the military are on the same rotational cycle, so, you know, individual by individual, unit by unit, organization by organization, the human resources are getting great experience here, too. And of course as organizational change takes place -- catch up, it should work.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Grim with Blackfive.

Q Yeah, this is Grim with Blackfive.net. I was actually going to ask about that very thing you just spent a little while talking about, the recruiting process for PRTs and whether State was getting the right people and how we could help. But since you've spoken about that for a long time, I'm going to ask you instead a question that Professor Andrew Lubin wanted asked. He remarks on the fact that some of the people we have talked to have described the struggle in Iraq as essentially a generational struggle, something that we would have to commit to for quite a long time in order to see a final result that was beneficial, and he would like to know whether that seems to be true in the area where you are or whether you expect to be able to get results within a few years other than on a generational basis.

MR. BUCKLER: I'm probably a bit more optimistic on that score. And I will preface what I say by saying that I'm making my observations only about Salahuddin province. I don't have the advantage of having traveled around the country to have anything by which to compare this.

But the characteristics of Salahuddin province -- the almost entirely Sunni populace that lives here -- are also the former beneficiaries of favoritism from the Saddam Hussein regime. And if you go back in history all the way back to the Ottoman Empire, the Sunni have been used and have provided service, oftentimes as the educated bureaucrats of government. So even though I may have said, well, it was more favorable toward them under Saddam, the history of Sunnis being -- kind of like I heard the Scots one day described as being the bureaucrats of the British Empire -- the Sunnis to a certain degree, and I think particularly here in Salahuddin, have come with organizational training and educational skills that I believe will enable them to progress more rapidly once the basic organizations of government fall into place.

As a former Iraqi army general once described Salahuddin to me, he said, "This is the province that obeys the law." I was newly arrived and didn't show any dismay. I just sort of said, well, we'll watch this one as time goes on, but I've come around to his way of thinking. There is very much a respect for process, government. You know, their ideal of government may be more authoritarian than our own, but nonetheless, established authority is something that they respect.

So I think that is a real leg up on proceeding more rapidly. I think that the younger people who -- with whom I have relatively little contact given the security constraints of my job, I would hope, have better -- I don't mean this sarcastically -- but good adult supervision as they grow up and, I hope, join the economy and body politic.

So taking a look at Sunni history and how I see that reflected in their political/social ideals here, I think this area has the potential -- the human potential to move faster. Now they don't have the natural resources while much of the rest of the country does, so I think a good bit of this will depend upon ensuring that they feel politically enfranchised so far as the distribution of national wealth goes. I think it's important that the goodwill and desire to participate politically continue for Salahuddin.

I think there was some good news out of Baghdad like about two days ago on some compromises reached, particularly on de-Ba'athification, that will, I think, be very, very positive here.

Q Thank you.

MR. BUCKLER: Did I answer your question?

Q Well, it's really Professor Lubin's (sp) question, but I'm sure he will let you know if he needs to know anything else.

MR. BUCKLER: Well, pin me down. I don't mind.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Bruce McQuain.

Q Yes, Mr. Buckler. Bruce McQuain with QandO.net. A couple questions, actually. One, we just talked with Mr. Keegan up in -- who's up in Kirkuk, and he said that he's seeing a little security deterioration since the surge in Baghdad has begun in earnest. And it appears in his opinion to be displacement.

I was wondering if you're seeing any of that? And secondly, you guys have obviously been hard at work hooking -- standing up and hooking up the local governments and the provincial governments, but can you give us an idea of how well the hook-up from province to central government is going?

MR. BUCKLER: First on the security, yeah, Howard got it right. The tracing from September '06 until about now, we've seen a steady increase in the number of incidents of violence. Generally, you know, I can't make a broad -- too much of a broad sweeping statement because we just had a police station blown up in Bayji, but by and large the nature of the violence here has not been the mass casualty tragedies like we've seen down in Baghdad. But the number of bombs, mortar attacks, rocket attacks, shooting, gun fights and whatnot has continued to climb slowly. There is just no two ways about it.

So far as its impact on our ability to work here in Tikrit, hasn't really affected us. You know, we travel with a great deal of security. The army here provides us great protection. The violence has not really hit Tikrit with the same impact that it has farther south, because of course, I mean, all we need do is look at the map and we have Anbar to the west and Diyala to the east of the southern parts of Salah ad Din. So naturally enough, the roads and the nature of the insurgency being what it is, if you squeeze toothpaste tubes in Al Anbar and in Diyala, the toothpaste squeezes out here in Salah ad Din. So I agree with Howard on that.

But we're able to pretty much move along without that impacting the frequency of our contact with the local officials. We try to get out a lot to the cities of Bayji, Balad, Samarra and -- we fly for that. And the military are wonderfully courageous. It's great. They take us right along and -- so we work pretty well unimpeded.

So that's -- you know, we pick up every once in a while when a bomb goes off too close or when I look down at the ground from the helicopter I realize that the pilot certainly wants to live as badly as I do so that -- (laughter) -- we all have a shared self interest when we're flying. And they're all wonderfully skilled, so I'm in good hands.

The provincial and local hook-ups, yeah we keep working on that and as you say, it's an item of our focus and it will get better over time. Between the province and the national government, the Northern Command of the multinational forces has been very, very good to all of us, whether we're in Kirkuk, Mosul, Salah ad Din, Baqubah, even taking the provincial officials down to Baghdad to get them ministerial meetings to meet with the top leadership of the government. So the liaisons are building slowly.

We try to help and follow up and find out what commitments were made and push. I know that our coalition colleagues and the embassy both will take our lists of pending items and push the government of Iraq to try to act on those, and they're being very active. We just had a governors conference convened by the deputy prime minister and, you know, it's very good to hear the interaction. They lay it all right out on the table. The deputy prime minister is extremely responsive and, you know, you come back feeling good about it.

But these are certainly relationships that have to develop. There's no two ways about it, there are in many cases opposing parties but we have a democracy that makes all of that work as well. So we -- I think if we take a look at the central government they are doing a good job of getting the provincial budget monies out to them. And between this budget year and last, I've seen a huge improvement in the central government's monitoring and attempt to impose discipline on the budget execution project in the provinces. I can see very concrete improvements in the way that they are getting the money out and monitoring its expenditure.

So I -- a lot of this is all about money so I'm very -- I'm optimistic that I'm seeing things working better. What the provinces crave now is more authority of their own to hire and fire the -- for example, the directors general that really make the electricity and the water and the sewage and all the public services work are appointed by Baghdad. Now some of us Americans might indeed find it scary if Washington appointed such key officials at the state level, but that's what the case is here and we are hopeful that a provincial powers act can indeed delegate more both personnel and budgetary authorities to the provinces. That will help a great deal.

Q And is that provincial powers act in the works? Is that something you guys --

MR. BUCKLER: Yes. Yeah, that's something that is one of those key legislative acts that the national government is working on.

Q Gotcha.

MR. BUCKLER: The embassy and the coalition keep, you know, giving their plug as well. The exact provisions of what will come out I do not know, but we're anxious to see it.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Jarred Fishman.

Q Yes sir, thanks for your time. A quick question, a three parter. Do you know anything about Maliki's visit to Tikrit, since you're in the area, last week? And that ties in with the national reconciliation efforts we've seen in Baghdad.

MR. BUCKLER: Whose visit?

Q Maliki, Prime Minister Maliki's visit last week to --

MR. BUCKLER: Yeah, I sat through it -- (laughter). It was, you know, one of these things you feel good about. Some of us -- I mean, the minimal, the minimal satisfaction is the fact that the prime minister came here. There is nothing like a national level politician or representative or leader coming out to the provinces like this to simply express commitment and be seen.

His meetings with the provincial authorities were very, very good. It was kind of a -- one might call it a roundtable, although they were seated around the confines of a conference room. But the governor, the deputy governor, a number of the sheiks, the military -- or the army and the police were all able to speak with him directly and had a very good exchange with him. He was very open, communicated with each and every one of them on their particular issues, had his staff there to take notes, recognition, things to follow up on.

And I didn't, unfortunately, get a chance to sit right down with the governor or the deputy governor and ask them what their reactions were on events since have just been so. I haven't had that chance to do it yet. But it was just excellent that he came up and was gracious in meeting with everybody and had a very good interaction with all.

I was very pleased. I hope it got the right kind of coverage down in Baghdad, and I don't have enough insight between relations between the province and their political -- their representatives in the Council of -- representatives to know, you know, kind of the second and third effects. But from my standpoint and that of the embassy, we were very pleased.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred, did you have a follow-up on that, or --?

Q Well, just, the quick follow-up was, A, can some of this progress, which obviously is demonstrable what you've got -- tons of progress, can that make it into the September 15 reports which are going to be distributed? And also, how does the United States get credit on the ground for these billions of dollars of projects?

Do you see that the Iraqi new generations, you know, they can acknowledge that these are American projects? Or just years from now, is it going to be like the British back in the 1920s, where no one really remembers what the hell they did?

MR. BUCKLER: (Laughs.) Well, on the first question, will all of this find its way into the September report, we keep feeding it to Baghdad. We make sure that whatever happens here does find its way down to our officers in Baghdad. So, you know, they'll be doing the final edit, but we make sure that it gets pushed down there.

Now on the nature of the various projects and credit and whatnot, I was -- I'll sort of give you an oblique answer -- not an oblique answer but maybe a couple of answers all in one here.

About three days ago, I was sitting in a large meeting right next to the head of the provincial council -- now that's the equivalent of the state legislature, and the head of it in speaking to everyone and it was -- the subject matter of the meeting was one that I convened on combatting (enemy ?) extremism.

But in any case, he talked a little bit about what the provincial council had done, and he said, "Right now, we have been able to provide more projects than we ever did during Saddam Hussein's time." As I said earlier, Saddam Hussein took special care of this area, so the fact that the current government can and has bragging rights to the fact that on that key measure of their own effectiveness and the way they present it to their constituency, numbers of projects, they're trumping a regime that took special care Sal ad Din. So that's very good.

Now, on the other hand, I was talking to one of the generals up here in the northern sector who pointed out that oftentimes as we indicate the coalition or the CERP funds or, in one way or another, the U.S. government built that, built that, built that, built that, there is a seeming profound degree of ignorance, whether it is real or feigned as to what we have done so far as our own construction projects to try and improve and develop Iraq. So how memories will serve our constructions here, I'd say, is still up in the air.

My own effort in the PRT is to try to work with the provincial officials, whether they be engineers, whether they be elected officials, whether they be mayors, city councilmembers or whoever, to try to give them as much training as we can on what I just generically say is a process, whether it be a budget process, a budget execution process, a contract management process to try to make our investment in the human capital, which I think will make a big difference now.

As a prominent official down in Baghdad whispered in my ear once, pertaining to some of the provinces, he said, "They have money, and I don't think anybody disputes that, we're here to help them spend it."

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much. Any follow-up questions? All right, sir. Steven Buckler, the PRT Team Leader with -- in Salah ad Din, coming -- (audio break) -- with us this morning on the Bloggers' Roundtable.

Thank you, sir, for being with us. And hopefully, we can speak again.

MR. BUCKLER: Always at your disposal.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) All right. Thank you very much sir.

MR. BUCKLER: Thank you very much. Bye-bye.

MR. HOLT: Bye-bye.

END.